

The CEA Forum

Winter/Spring 2007: 36.1

SPECIAL SECTION: EMPATHY AND ETHICS

MICRO-COMMUNICATIONS: BUILDING AND DEVELOPING RESPECT AND EMPATHY IN TODAY'S MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

[Carol Bliss](#)

I am fortunate to have many different experiential perspectives in the classroom. I teach on one of the most diverse campuses in Southern California. The demographics of California State Polytechnic University, Pomona are fertile ground for teaching and creating a greater climate of empathy and respect for students from differing cultural backgrounds. Important demographic shifts are occurring across the nation. These changes provide unique challenges and opportunities for teaching and modeling empathy and respect. Undergraduate student profiles from Cal Poly 2006-2007 reveal the following student population:

Asian/Pacific Islander	33%
Hispanic	27%
White	25%
Unknown	11%
African American	4%

These figures represent students with differing life experiences, cultural norms, and traditions. As educators, we have opportunities to make an impact on the ways in which students will experience the world for years to come. Education is much more than discipline-based knowledge. It is preparation for the rest of life and the expansion of awareness. University classrooms can provide opportunities to acknowledge and appreciate different perspectives and experiences. What are some of the ways we, as educators, can teach students to respect and value others? How do professors model empathy and help to develop a nurturing classroom? How can each of us teach and model empathy and respect to help ease some of the tensions in today's chaotic world?

Using the lens of semiotic analysis (the study of signs and meaning), this essay will address the variety of signals through which the values of caring and compassion are communicated, expressed, and understood. As students become more aware of the importance and impact of empathic words, signals, gestures, and behavior, positive styles of interaction can evoke closer connections, greater rapport, and build better collaboration both in and outside of the classroom. These learning experiences that occur in our classrooms become invaluable in careers, in relationships, and throughout students' lives. This essay will also discuss using film, poetry, and song lyrics to explore empathy and the understanding of characters as archetypes and aspects of self.

Through the use of film and literature, attention to detail can be magnified. Semiotic analysis can focus attention on micro-communications. By analyzing specific frames in film and suspending action in carefully selected scenes, students can begin to recognize, discuss, and appreciate the variety of nuanced communications, which collectively contribute to expressions and perceptions of empathy and respect. Finally, this essay will present ideas for activities and exercises that help build respect in the classroom.

The use of semiotics, the study of signifiers and meaning, as a framework for understanding allows unconscious behavior and habitual ways of interaction to become conscious. Once these micro-aspects of interaction are made visible, they can be understood, practiced, and integrated into everyday life. Through a conscious awareness of some of the ways in which the nuances of communication impact others, students quickly discover why micro-variables in gaze, facial expression, frequency, words, duration, tone of voice, volume, posture, and proxemics are important aspects of communicating empathy, compassion, and authentic interpersonal connection. As these elements of communication are explored, a shift in students' perception occurs, allowing greater awareness of how micro-moments can contribute to transmitting empathy, value, and respect for other students, cultural experiences and communities.

I became interested in the nuances of micro-communication and the ways in which respect is transmitted through the work of Stephen Young. Young's work explores the small, subtle ways in which disrespect is communicated. In his book, *Micro Messaging*, he explains that, "microinequities are cumulative, subtle messages that occur when these signals are negative or promote a negative bias." Microinequities occur with alarming frequency. According to Young, "They are cumulative, repeated behaviors that devalue, discourage, and impair performance." Research estimates that individuals send out between 2,000 to 4,000 nonverbal micromessages each day.

Mary Rowe at the Sloan School of Management at MIT coined the term "microinequities" to examine why some people in the workplace felt included and why some felt excluded. She laid the framework for focusing awareness on the small ways in which messages about the value of specific individuals are transmitted. Microinequities are what we might have called "attitude" in Junior High. These small slights, which can often seem too petty to talk about, frequently result in feelings of not being valued or being disrespected by others. Students can relate to the importance of a single word and the comparative duration of its impact in the Countee Cullen poem, "Incident:"

And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."
I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

Another effective example is the scene on the bus from Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* where a bicycle tire accidentally brushes against a new white tennis shoe, sparking a fight as microcommunications of disrespect and singular brief experiences which have long ranging and volatile impact. By illuminating these so-called small slights and their effect on identity and the resulting exclusion from community, lively discussions ensue.

Examples of microinequities include barely perceptible messages of disinterest such as facial expression, gaze, tone of voice, posture of indifference, length of interaction, the widening or narrowing of eyes, and hundreds of tiny microcommunications. Examples can be found on any day in any classroom in America: a look of disdain, slumped body posture, lack of interest in another student's comment, a sideways look, a sigh, or a barely audible expression of derision. As adults we have all felt these withering slights, whether with students, or in a department meeting when one person's comment is perceived as unimportant or the subtle differences in introducing lecturers versus chairs or deans. Both respect and disrespect are communicated in small, subtle ways, which can make us feel valued, or not.

By making microinequities conscious and discussing their impact with students, we can begin to change these messages and effect important transformations. We can model the positive micromessages of respect. Practiced repeatedly, positive micro-communications can spark creativity, leadership, empathy, and exceptional performance. Once students become aware of these subtle micromessages and their impact, they can discuss their importance and practice transmitting different messages.

One of the ways that respectful communications can be created in the classroom is through a discussion of values. On the first day of class, my students write their most important values. We list these on the board and discuss them. Despite culture or ethnic background, there is usually little variation among students' top three. These usually include family, love, friendship, and God. Time after time, class after class, these values have appeared among the top three. This awareness of common values among a group of students helps them feel more similar than dissimilar and helps to create a bond for the rest of our time together. Later, we relate these values to the discipline, for example, how mass media influences our values.

In the beginning of my one of my communications classes we identify some of the component parts of respect. We discuss what respect looks like and isolate each of the elements, such as gaze, eye contact, and facial expression. We practice some of these micro-communications, such as demonstrating facial expressions of interest and encouragement. Students recognize the importance of respect when they are new, nervous, and uncomfortable. They know it when they see it and they enjoy demonstrating. We practice as a group. I ask what a respectful audience looks like and they physically recreate these elements as a group. I explain the rationale, that we will be a respectful audience so that everyone can feel comfortable, valued, and respected. We discuss awareness of audience's beliefs, attitudes, and cultural values and how we can connect respectfully. Students begin to discuss the small ways in which they have felt disrespected.

I explain that in our writing and speaking, we may be addressing issues that are deeply personal and meaningful in our lives and so we need to practice communicating caring and empathy. Again, students are always eager to

demonstrate. We practice the body posture of listening attentively. As a group, we lean forward. We exaggerate. We pop our eyes open wide to demonstrate interest in a speaker's words. We practice maintaining eye contact and nodding appreciatively to show interest. We model and practice what empathic listening looks like. What a difference it makes for the rest of our time together. And when students forget, they remind each other. In this way new speakers feel more comfortable, they expect respect, they share more deeply. Since using these simple techniques, I have discovered that when they expect a greater level of respect and empathy, they speak from deeper places inside themselves about personal subjects that rarely come to light in the classroom, such as abusive fathers, girlfriends who became pregnant, personal struggles and hardships in the home.

We talk about the power of small things, the power of words to shape our images and the way that we see and experience the world. I ask the students to bring lyrics from favorite songs. They love the late rapper, Tupac Shakur. Many students come from racial groups or communities where they believe they have not been valued or respected. Tupac's images speak to this:

Did u hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete

Proving nature's laws wrong it learned 2 walk without having feet

Funny it seems but by keeping its dreams

it learned to breathe fresh air

Long live the rose that grew from concrete

when no one else even cared

Using lyrics students love as a way to connect the experience of feeling devalued, less than and unimportant can be very powerful.

Another simple connective activity is practicing communicating with pride. What does pride look and sound like? As a micro-communication, tone of voice is an important element. We practice changing our tone and volume in what students consider a fun, physical activity. They are asked to line up quickly in a huge circle around the room in the order of the city of their birth. We practice the speaker's posture of respect, what I call the 'power stance,' feet shoulder-width apart, arms back, chest expanded, and head held high. And then with enthusiasm and volume ratcheted up, we go from A to Z, proudly proclaiming our birthplaces – from Anchorage to Zimbabwe. This 5-minute exercise allows students to see and experience the rich diversity that makes up their classroom. They remember and often refer much later to some of the particular birthplaces of other students in their public presentations. It's an extremely effective exercise because it is both visual and kinetic. Once a classroom becomes connected, it then becomes easier to transfer empathy and respect to people and experiences outside the classroom.

I have taught literature and media in China and Thailand and I often use the power of film in exploring the small nuances of empathy and respect for other experiences. Even students living in relatively homogenous populations can relate to issues of respect and empathy outside their own culture through the use of films that show various ways that people experience cultural differences. The movie *Crash* provides an excellent opportunity to discuss issues of respect, inclusion, and empathy. I was surprised to see how students from small Asian villages who knew nothing of the Harlem Renaissance or the roots of American blues could understand and relate to the characters in *Crash*.

Semiotics in film is a valuable way to show what respect and the lack of it looks like. In film, it is possible to

isolate and focus on specific frames and to discuss a particular aspect, such as gaze, tone, expression, duration, and the messages communicated by clothing. Students are very tuned into the nuances of clothing and what it signifies.

While watching short segments of film, groups focus on a single element of communication transmitted by a particular character, such as facial expression, tone of voice, speed, color, or body movement. In this way the micro-communications transmitted by a character can be examined. Through *Crash*, we can delve more deeply into how actions and behaviors can be so misunderstood with such tragic consequences. This film performs well with students from other cultures in raising awareness of issues of respect, demonstrating and helping to facilitate discussions about the importance of empathy and respect for other experiences. Through the analysis of these characters, students speculate on the backstory, the previous life experiences of the characters. Drawing from their own experiences, international students talk about how it feels to be misunderstood and disrespected because of societal perceptions. By understanding the micro-ways in which respect is transmitted, individuals become more aware of their unconscious behaviors and those that tend to influence other's perception of them.

Lessons of empathy and respect can be modeled and taken beyond the classroom in a group activity I call '\$50 to Change the World'. Parker Palmer emphasizes "the value of authentic service in the world." When I noticed how animated students became while speaking and writing about the service projects in their sororities and fraternities, I began to use this positive energy. I developed a group project where various groups envision a good works' project and plan a fundraiser to help others. The premise provides \$50 in seed money for each group project. Working in groups, students become very excited. The volume rises. Posture changes. The engagement and collaboration of students in these projects demonstrates the inherent universal qualities of empathy and compassion.

At the developmental stage of traditional college students, ages 18-to-22, they truly believe they can change the world. The ideas that they come up with are astonishing. In the planning process, the first step is to discuss who might benefit. Students propose ideas and explain some of the hardships that their particular group faces. Recipients have included teens in California Youth Authority, children in the Sudan, families in Darfur, families of prisoners, children in rural Chinese and Mexican villages, survivors of Hurricane Katrina and soldiers in Iraq. These projects have proven so successful that they will be integrated into a service-learning course in the Fall. Taking empathy and ethics outside the classroom and allowing individuals to work together for good not only builds empathy and respect in the classroom, it helps to expand these ideas, practices, and beliefs into the world outside the students' personal experiences. In this way students can connect what they learn and practice in the classroom to become more caring, empathic, and respectful citizens.

Works Cited

Palmer, Parker. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening to the Voice of Vocation*. John Wiley & Sons, 2000.

"Pocket Facts 2006-2007," published by the Office of Public Affairs, California State Polytechnic University.

Rowe, Mary P. "Barriers to Equality: The Power of Subtle Discrimination to Maintain Unequal Opportunity." *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 3 (1990): 153-63.

Shakur, Tupac, *The Rose that Grew from Concrete*. New York: Pocket Books, 1999.

Young, Stephen. *Micro Messaging : Why Great Leadership is Beyond Words*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2006.

Carol Bliss (drbliss@gmail.com) has a nontraditional approach to college teaching that helps her connect with students from a variety of life experiences. A former high school dropout, she worked as a Journeyman Carman for Union Pacific Railroad, a mechanic in the steel industry, and a pastoral counselor. After working twenty years in the entertainment industry as a copywriter for films and television, she now teaches in the Communication Department at Cal Poly, Pomona where her students make her laugh every day.

She is the co-producer of a documentary film, *Mosou Song Journey*, released in 2007, and is currently conducting interviews exploring spirituality in higher education. Recent articles include "Bringing Heart into the Classroom" and "Integrating Meaning and Purpose: The Student-Centered College Classroom." Carol has taught in China and Thailand and lives in the idyllic town of Claremont, California, "City of Trees and Ph.D.'s," with two of the most beautiful cats on the planet.

Return to [Table of Contents](#)